Reflections
01/29/12

It is conventional wisdom in our family not to ask Dad a question of any substance unless you have a lot of time because the answer can go on for a while. One son said one time, "Don't even think about asking him any question having anything to do with history because he will begin with ancient Rome and work his way up through the Reformation, The American Revolution, the Second World War and conclude with something about the Pennsylvania Rail Road." And so I was delighted, and grateful, to be given a perfect way to begin my last sermon here, when that very son told me a delightful story. He has two daughters, seven and four. Fiona, 7, apparently heard something on television about the Tea Party which, I am sure, sounded to her – well, like – a tea party. So my son, as I have done so many times, sat his little girls down for a little history lesson. He began with Boston in the 1770s, and taxation without representation and the thirteen colonies and King George – and how the people of Boston wanted to express their anger with the British so one night some of them dressed up like Native Americans and secretly approached British ships laden with tea in the Boston Harbor – at which point, Eliza, 4, said, "Ok, Daddy, you can wrap it up now."

So, that is what we must do now. But I have one more story. You may have noticed that I receive a lot of sermon material from my grandchildren and I believe I have found a way, shamelessly, to work every one of them into a sermon on one occasion or another – all but Alex. Alex is six and he attends Kindergarten at Washington Irving Public School in Oak Park. Right on schedule, as I was thinking about what I might say on this occasion Alex's mother sent me an e-mail. She was reviewing with Alex his homework that had to do with Martin Luther King. She explained how before Martin Luther King black and white children had to go to separate schools, and couldn't eat lunch together or sit together on the bus. "What color are you, Alex?" she asked. And Alex, who is biracial, looked down at his pjs and said "red and brown with white stripes." Exactly. And a good introduction to one of the most striking stories Jesus ever told.

But, first, a few reflections. After twenty six and a half years as pastor of this church, my heart is full of gratitude this morning. Thank you for the privilege of it. Thank you for honoring me by joining me in this weekly exercise, of listening, engaging, sometimes arguing, pushing back, not

always agreeing but always respecting, always engaged, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. Anyone who has tried to do this as long as I have, learned long ago that preaching is not a solo performance, but a collaboration between one person and a congregation, and that it is the congregation, the gathered community who bring their faith, doubts, hurts, joys and hopes and sit together in anticipation that the words spoken might contain a word from God. You cannot phone a sermon in. It requires a congregation.

Thank you for that. And thank you for allowing me into your lives at critical moments of birth, baptism, moments of high joy and celebration, and moments of sickness, loss and deep grief. There simply is no greater honor than that, nor is there anything quite like it anywhere else in the world.

Thank you for your commitment to mission, for making this place a Light in the City and thank you for being an extended family for Sue and me and our children and their spouses and our grandchildren. Thank you for your love and prayers which we have needed and which have blessed us.

I have not been on this journey alone. There is one who has been with me ever day, every step of the way from the very beginning – Caroline Sue Kearney Buchanan.

We have lived this life together from the day we drove from Altoona, Pennsylvania to Chicago, Hyde Park, and began our life in a spare married student apartment and I began my studies at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, and Chicago Theological Seminary: and she began her work as Administrative Assistant to the President of the Seminary.

She typed my papers, and for years, my sermons, and at our first small church, produced the Sunday bulletin on typewriter and mimeograph machine, and together we folded them on Saturday night.

She wore lightly but gracefully the mantle of minister's wife and the expectations and obligations that sometimes go along with it. She was, and is, in her own way, a faithful Christian, participating in the church as her own person, doing what she felt called to do; sang in the choir, taught Sunday School.

And every Sunday she was in worship, not because of who she was married to, but because praise and adoration and gratitude to God are part of who she is.

And she gave birth to five wonderful children, our family, each of whom has become an amazing adult, wife, husband, mother, father. I am more proud of that than anything: that our family is intact, that they each are great parents and human beings with strong values and commitment, and belong to and participate in their churches.

They are all here this morning and I know you know them; nevertheless I cannot resist showing them off one last time: Diane Buchanan, husband Rick Andrew, Dallas, parents of Caitlin, Cameron, and Carolyn; Susan Buchanan, husband Steve Brown, Oak Park, parents of Alex and Nick; John Buchanan, husband of Nancy, Chicago, parents of Rachel, Johnny, and Eleanor, members of Fourth Church; Andrew Buchanan, husband of Mary, Chicago, parents of Kate, Ella, and Lilly, Andy is a member of Fourth Church; Brian Buchanan, husband of Jillian, San Diego, parents of Fiona and Eliza.

Also I am so pleased that my brother William Paul Buchanan, Bill, and his wife, Lynn, from Wichita, Kansas are here, and Sue's brother, Bill Kearney and wife, Sharlene, from Naples, Florida.

I know that she dislikes enormously being asked to stand up in church, but one last time, Carolyn Sue Kearny Buchanan.

And thank you for retirement events that now must feel to some of you like a marathon. When we began to think about how best to retire after twenty six years, the Transition Task Force we formed decided on the long model, extended over months, not the shorter, more abrupt way of doing this. The idea is that we all need time to adjust to change and that the adjustment could begin while I am still around, thus making for a smoother, more productive transition. It has worked. I know it worked because I have heard regularly, folks ask "Are you still here? I thought you retired months ago." But the real gift has been a series of events that I have enjoyed immensely. In fact, this has been fun. A Cubs game in September and the thrill of throwing out the first pitch and then enjoying a spectacular night at Wrigley Field – and a game, which the Cubs lost. That will change now, I know, because as my oldest son reminded us last Sunday at the

Congregational meeting the entire Chicago Cubs enterprise is now led by a young, thirty year old Jewish man from the East – who just may be our savior.

The evening of music, with all our incredible musicians, playing and singing my favorite music, from J.S. Bach, to a luscious rendition of Tenderly, from Tower Brass and children standing up in the pews, from the Morning and Children's Choirs singing my favorite anthems, to Leszek Pytka and Richard Zurek presenting, with keyboard and guitar, Bessame Mucho.

Walter Brueggemann's superb lecture the week before last will be, I'm sure, an important contribution to academic thought regarding what it means to be an urban church in the 21st Century. And it was a thrill to see so many former colleagues who have shared their ministry with me over the years.

I began ministry as a student pastor in 1960, was ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament upon graduation from Divinity School in 1963 and have had the privilege of serving through an amazing and important time in American history and church history. In 1960 the Mainline churches, including the Presbyterian Church, were still in midst of robust growth. Our nation was at peace. Dwight Eisenhower was completing his term as President. The economy was good. In the Calumet region of Northern Indiana where I was serving at the tine there were five Presbyterian New Church Developments, all of them thriving. I was the organizing pastor of one of them, in Dyer. I have been a parish pastor through the Civil Rights Movement, the bombing of an African American Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on a Sunday morning that took the lives of four little girls, and changed me forever, Selma, the March on Washington, the assassination of a president, Vietnam, the cultural revolution of the 60s and 70s, campus unrest, the unforgettable trauma of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent sudden focus on Interfaith relations after 9/11, and for more than three decades, uninterrupted conflict in the church over issues of human sexuality. In the meantime, for a variety of complex sociological reasons the Mainline Protestant Church presence in American culture was reduced by about half, while individual congregations, like this one, thrived and grew. And so, my sense, is that outposts like the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago will remain very important in the ongoing evolution of the role of religion in American culture.

I have high hopes for the entire enterprise, particularly here. I am so very grateful for the church staff I have been blessed to work with over the years. There is something about sharing ministry – daily – with people you admire and respect and love and simply enjoy being with that has been a great gift. The current staff, led by Calum MacLeod is, in a word, superb, every one of them and they will lead this church with energy, imagination, intelligence and love in the important time ahead. I have a dream and a fervent hope and a very personal request: Be here when the community gathers. Be here next Sunday – all of you! It will be a very important occasion, Calum will be in the pulpit, the first week, first worship service in the next chapter of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago.

Last Tuesday and again Friday I took a tour of our new building, now under construction and under roof. I walked every inch of it, and could imagine the spaces, the Commons, Chapel, Day School, Dining Room, Offices and Classrooms – full of people seven days a week, full of ideas and creativity and energy – and love for God and neighbors and a passion to put that love to work in the world. There are very bright days ahead for the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. The transition ahead, while the Pastor Nominating Committee does its important work, can be a creative, robust time with the completion of the building and moving into it now just nine months ahead. I cannot wait to see that future and to be part of it when, after our new pastor is here and settled, Sue and I rejoin you on Sunday mornings – in this blessed space – to lift our hearts and voices in praise to God, and to be part of this amazing enterprise – this Light in the City.